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A Public Access Workshop

A public access workshop is a video-cable facility open and available for use to everyone in the community. The following is a description of the essential workings of such a facility based on the experiences of the Alternate Media Center in helping to set up workshops in DeKalb, Illinois; Orlando, Florida; and Reading, Pennsylvania, among others.

In these communities, with the financial help of the local cable companies, public access channels are now in operation which are completely operated by volunteers, with only one or two paid coordinators. Through the use of these facilities anyone may reserve time on the community access cable channel on a first-come-first-served basis. The workshop's equipment includes portapaks, cameras, editing decks, monitors, microphones, lights, telephones and modulators.

What is unique to these three projects, however, is the fact that these workshops each control their own public access channel, which has both live and tape capability. Their volunteers teach free classes in the use of video recorders, editing decks and cablecasting equipment. *The Access Workbook*, a complete documentation of how these centers operate, as well as a detailed analysis of the use of the particular equipment configurations, has recently been published by the Alternate Media Center at New York University School of the Arts. Therefore, what I will describe in this paper will be the vital psychological dimension involved in this new medium. Learning how to use portable television equipment is becoming increasingly easy. What remains difficult is learning how to communicate with these new technologies—learning how to use these tools to accomplish what is most needed.

The workshop members are those in the community who feel the need to share what they know, feel, or do with others in the community and who invite response from those interested. These workshops become a nutritive context in which people are able to use the new information technologies without fear and often with personal and public benefit.

The people who come into such an environment play a number of roles. A workshop member is also a fireman, a doctor, a senior citizen, a Rotarian, a waitress, a student—most likely a combination of many identities. In Florida, for instance, the term “workshop project” was coined for a particular idea or event that involves the cooperation of workshop members volunteering to work together in presenting a program or a series of programs for the channel. Those involved in a project are responsible for publicity, organization, reservation of time and equipment, and seeing that it gets on the cable, as well as encouraging feedback.

Workshop projects include, for example: city council meetings, art festivals, social service programs, children’s shows, ecology projects, and community civic projects. These projects are an important aspect of the development of public access in that they increase interaction and encourage discussion between individual workshop producers. There are endless examples of this process: members of the Deaf Orlando Club met other members of the workshop during their work with the College Park Art Festival. Nick Hart, working on his library tape about the Young Adults Department, achieved the rank of Eagle Scout; he has since been helpful in the development of the Boy Scouts’ City Council Project. Members of the workshop, hearing about the City Council Project, are now working on the County Charter Commission Hearings, and people who had met each other while taping the Winter Park Art Festival are now helping with the production of the Sunday Morning Children’s Show.

As people interact and teach and learn from each other, the question we keep asking is: Are the people for whom the information is intended watching? Communication is at least a three-way process involving feed forward, feedback, and the context in which the interaction takes place. In the workshops the concern increasingly becomes not just the making of tapes, but learning how to use this new medium, cable, as an information system that is responsive to people’s changing needs.

A successful case in point was the use of DeKalb, Illinois of the public access workshop by the League of Women Voters during the time when a school bond issue was presented to the electorate of DeKalb. The league was an advocate of the proposal. They made a number of videotapes illustrating the conditions in the schools and pointing out where the money would be spent if it were approved. On the night before the election they went on the cable “live” in order to show the tapes and to discuss the implications of the issue. They brought with them resource people, and they opened up the telephone lines for questions.

They also took care to advertise the telecast widely. The response was so overwhelming that the program, which had been scheduled to run for three hours, was extended to six hours because of the numerous specific questions being called in by the cable audience.

The workshops become a learning environment and, for all who participate, an educational *system*. Ivan Illich has stated that "a good educational system should have three purposes: it should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known."¹

The questions to ask are: Can a "community library and information center," by housing a workshop facility and its capacity for cable channel origination, begin to become such an educational system? Can the library, as part of its traditional commitment to the enhancement of public communication, play a major role in the development of a complex community information system? A community-controlled workshop with broad participation under the auspices of the library could develop a new appreciation for the vital role of this institution in community life.

REFERENCE

1. Illich, Ivan D. *Deschooling Society*. New York, Harper & Row, 1972, p. 108.